
SEARS, ROEBUCK AND CO.

1300 BISCAYNE BOULEVARD

Designation Report



City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI PRESERVATION OFFICER
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD
ON THE POTENTIAL DESIGNATION OF
SEARS, ROEBUCK AND CO.
1300 BISCAYNE BOULEVARD
AS A HISTORIC SITE

Prepared by

Sarah E. Ector
for Preservation Officer

7-5-91
Date

Passed and
Adopted on

Resolution No.

Approved by

Chairman, Historic and
Environmental Preservation Board

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Name:

Sears, Roebuck and Co.

Current Name:

Sears, Roebuck and Co.

Location:

1300 Biscayne Boulevard
Miami, Florida 33132

Present Owner:

Sears, Roebuck and Co.
TX Department 568-S
675 Ponce de Leon Avenue, N.E.
Atlanta, Georgia 30395

Present Use:

Vacant

Zoning District:

SD-6

Tax Folio Number:

01-3231-035-0010

Boundary Description:

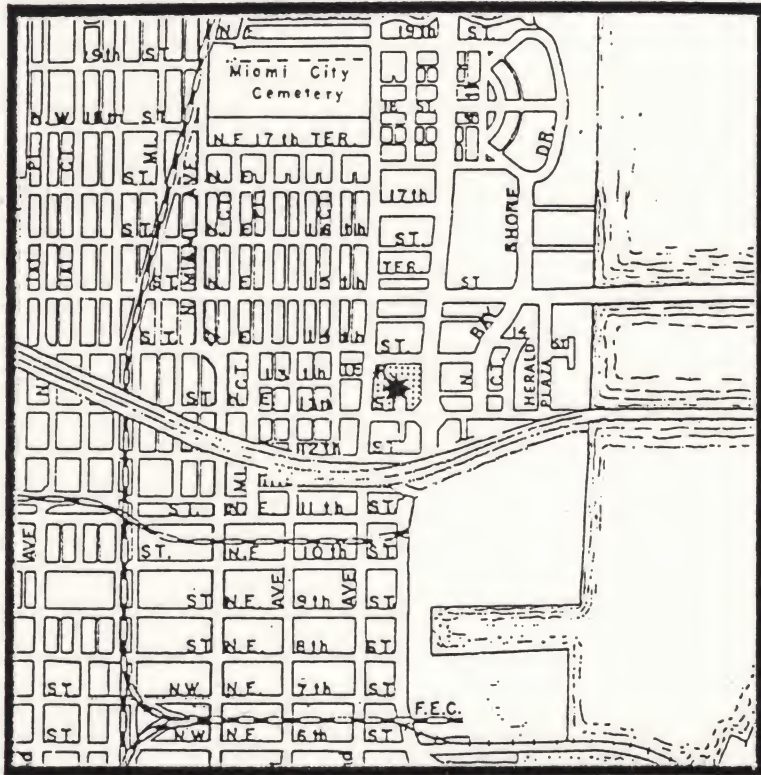
Tract "A" of the plat of BOULEVARD TRACT, as recorded in Plat Book 100 at Page 65 of the Public Records of Dade County, Florida.

Classification:

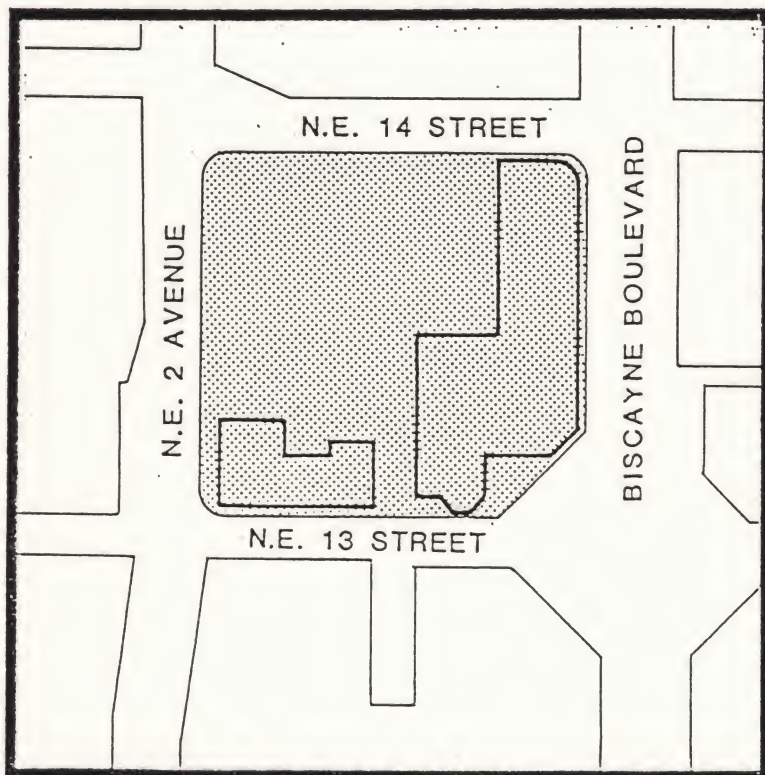
Historic Site

SEARS, ROEBUCK AND CO.

1300 BISCAYNE BOULEVARD



location



site plan

II. SIGNIFICANCE

Specific Dates:

1929

Architects:

Nimmons, Carr and Wright (original building)
Robert Law Weed and Vladamir L. Virrick (north annex)

Statement of Significance:

The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Department Store is significant in the history of architecture, commerce, and community planning in Miami. Built in 1929, the Sears building is one of the finest examples of Art Deco style architecture in Miami and embodies the distinctive features of that style as applied to a large, commercial structure. The building, moreover, is the earliest known example of the Art Deco style in Dade County, predating the Art Deco buildings on Miami Beach by almost six years. The opening of the Sears store on Biscayne Boulevard marked the culmination of efforts to establish a new shopping area for Greater Miami. The building, therefore, reflects the City's changing attitude toward commercial development in the late 1920s, brought about by the growing use of the automobile which led to the decentralization of shopping areas.

During the late 1920s, Sears, Roebuck and Co. was opening a new store every two working days. South Florida's first Sears store, selling only tires and auto accessories, opened in 1928 in an older, four story building at 835 W. Flagler Street. The immediate success of this store and a careful survey of the community by company experts prompted Sears to build a larger retail department store on Biscayne Boulevard in the following year. Groundbreaking for the new store took place on May 15, 1929, and the official opening was held on November 14, 1929. Established at a cost of \$750,000, the Biscayne store was the thirty-third store in Sears' southern territory and the third store for Florida.

Heralded as a great event for Miami, the opening of the store captured the City's attention. During the opening ceremonies, Mayor C. H. Reeder characterized the new store as "the finest store in the south." The Miami Daily News published a special, eight-page supplement on Sears, and the opening received widespread publicity elsewhere. As a result, more than 6,000 people visited the store during its first two hours of operation.

Designed by the prominent Chicago architectural firm of Nimmons, Carr and Wright, the Sears building is typical of the many stores that the firm designed for Sears and reflects the firm's philosophy in the design of these buildings. The choice of "modern" design to express the form and proportion of the entire composition and its parts is evident in the Biscayne Boulevard store. George Nimmons expressed his firm's design philosophy in a 1928 article in The American Architect:

The architectural treatment of the exterior design of these [retail store] buildings represents an effort to design in conformity with the modern movement. No historic style of architecture was followed, but the expression of the plan and arrangement of the parts of the building, together with the features of its construction were made the basis of the design. In nearly every case the vertical lines of construction were marked by strong piers or projections, and no cornices whatever were used. Forms and proportions of the whole composition and its parts were depended upon principally for the effects or design in each case. Features of importance were emphasized in a simple way by enrichments of stone carving in low relief.

The Biscayne store embodies many design features of Art Deco style architecture, the style associated with Sears stores built during this period. Foremost among these is the central tower, a trademark of Sears. The pronounced verticality of the tower is emphasized by the building's engaged, fluted piers, a feature typical of the Art Deco style. Also noteworthy is the variety of low relief ornamentation, highlighting such building features as the tower, entrance, and roof line. Although the store on Biscayne Boulevard is one of hundreds of Sears buildings constructed throughout the country during the early twentieth century, it is the only such building in South Florida.

The development of Biscayne Boulevard into a major commercial thoroughfare was a business venture unparalleled in Miami's history. The Boulevard was envisioned by the Biscayne Boulevard Company as a complete shopping center, carefully designed for beauty and comfort, and located outside of the downtown district. Characterized as the "new Fifth Avenue of the South," the Boulevard became the forerunner of the modern shopping center, with developers recognizing the increasing importance of the automobile and planning for it.

The Sears building, located at the foot of Biscayne Boulevard where a traffic circle marked one of the busiest intersections in Miami, served to anchor the Biscayne Boulevard development. In deciding to locate its new retail store here, Sears officials stated that although the Boulevard was far removed from downtown Miami, customers would use their cars to get to the store. Therefore, the abundance of parking spaces was of prime importance in the selection of a location. In basing its

decision on such a factor, Sears foreshadowed the course of development in Miami for the next several decades.

The prominent location of the building on Biscayne Boulevard has made the Sears building a landmark in uptown Miami. This location, at the crossroads of the major north-south traffic artery in 1920s Miami with the County causeway that connected Miami and Miami Beach, was, and still is, a major focus of activity. The Sears building strongly marks that spot.

Although the Sears store opened just as the country was entering the Depression, it survived and even flourished. The Burdine's Boulevard Shop next door, however, did not, and Sears soon expanded into that two story building. Opened on December 5, 1929, following the completion of Sears, the Burdine's Boulevard Shop was Miami's first Art Deco building designed by a local firm. Robert Law Weed, one of Miami's most prominent architects, and his associate Vladamir L. Virrick were the architects for this building as well as the majority of the other "modernistic" buildings constructed by the Biscayne Boulevard Company.

The Sears building has been vacant since June 1983 when company officials closed the oldest South Florida store.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Department Store is eligible for designation under the following criteria:

3. Exemplifies the historical, cultural, political, economic, or social trends of the community.

The Sears building is a reflection of commercial development in Miami during the late 1920s. The opening of the Sears store on Biscayne Boulevard marked the culmination of efforts by the Biscayne Boulevard Company to establish a new shopping area for Greater Miami. This type of business development, which called for a complete shopping center, carefully designed for beauty and comfort, and away from the downtown, was the forerunner of the modern shopping center. Sears' decision to locate here was based on its recognition of the increasing importance of the automobile. This decision thus foreshadowed the course of development in Miami for the next several decades.

5. Embodies those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or method of construction.

The Sears building is one of the finest examples of Art Deco style commercial architecture in Miami. Built in 1929, it is also the earliest known example of the style in Dade County, predating the

Art Deco buildings on Miami Beach by several years. The building is particularly noteworthy for its straightforward expression, applied ornamentation, central tower, and massing.

6. Is an outstanding work of a prominent designer or builder.

The Sears building was designed by the nationally-known firm of Nimmons, Carr and Wright and is a good example of the many stores which the firm designed for Sears. The north annex was designed by Robert Law Weed, one of Miami's most prominent architects, and his associate Vladamir L. Virrick.

7. Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship of outstanding quality or which represent a significant innovation or adaptation to the South Florida environment.

The Sears building is particularly noteworthy for the excellence of its design, craftsmanship, and detailing, embodied in such features as its central octagonal tower, engaged fluted piers, and applied low-relief ornamentation.

III. DESCRIPTION

Present and Original Appearance:

The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Department Store is a four story Art Deco style commercial building located at the entrance to uptown Miami. Rectangular in plan, the building features a seven story tower placed on a 45 degree angle on its southeast corner. The building is of reinforced concrete construction with a smooth stucco surface and is decorated with a variety of low relief ornamentation. Although several additions have been made to the building, none compromise its basic integrity.

Located on the northwest corner of Biscayne Boulevard and N.E. 13th Street, the Sears, Roebuck and Co. Department Store is a detached building which fronts directly on the sidewalk. Topped with a flat roof, the building originally featured four bays across the east (front) facade and six bays across the south facade.

The verticality of the building is emphasized by engaged, fluted piers which divide each bay and by the octagonal tower. The tower, the building's most prominent feature, is decorated with intricate, low relief ornamentation in a variety of stylized designs. A panel of birds and flowers adorns the lower portion of the tower, while ziggurats, floriated patterns, and a zigzag decorative band outline the parapet. On top are two large Sears signs that replace the original vertical sign running the length of the tower.

The main entrance to the building is located in the second bay on the east facade and features a pair of modern, aluminum and glass doors, topped with a transom. The entrance is flanked by heavy, fluted piers and is topped with a panel containing the store's name.

Store windows on the first story are fixed with four large glass panels. The original transoms over the windows are now covered, and metal awnings have replaced the original striped, canvas awnings. Windows on the other three stories are grouped in threes and are double hung metal sash with one over one lights.

In addition to the decoration on the tower, the main building is embellished with a band of chevron designs along the parapet and zigzag motifs between the first and second story windows. A floriated band is located above the second story windows over the main entrance. The vertical fluting which separates each bay is further emphasized on the first story by slightly projecting fluted piers topped by stylized ziggurats.

Large additions have been made to the building at two different times in its history. In the early 1930s, a two story structure directly north

of the Sears store was annexed. This building also constructed in 1929, originally housed the Burdine's Boulevard Shop. That department store, however, was forced to close shortly after opening because of the Depression.

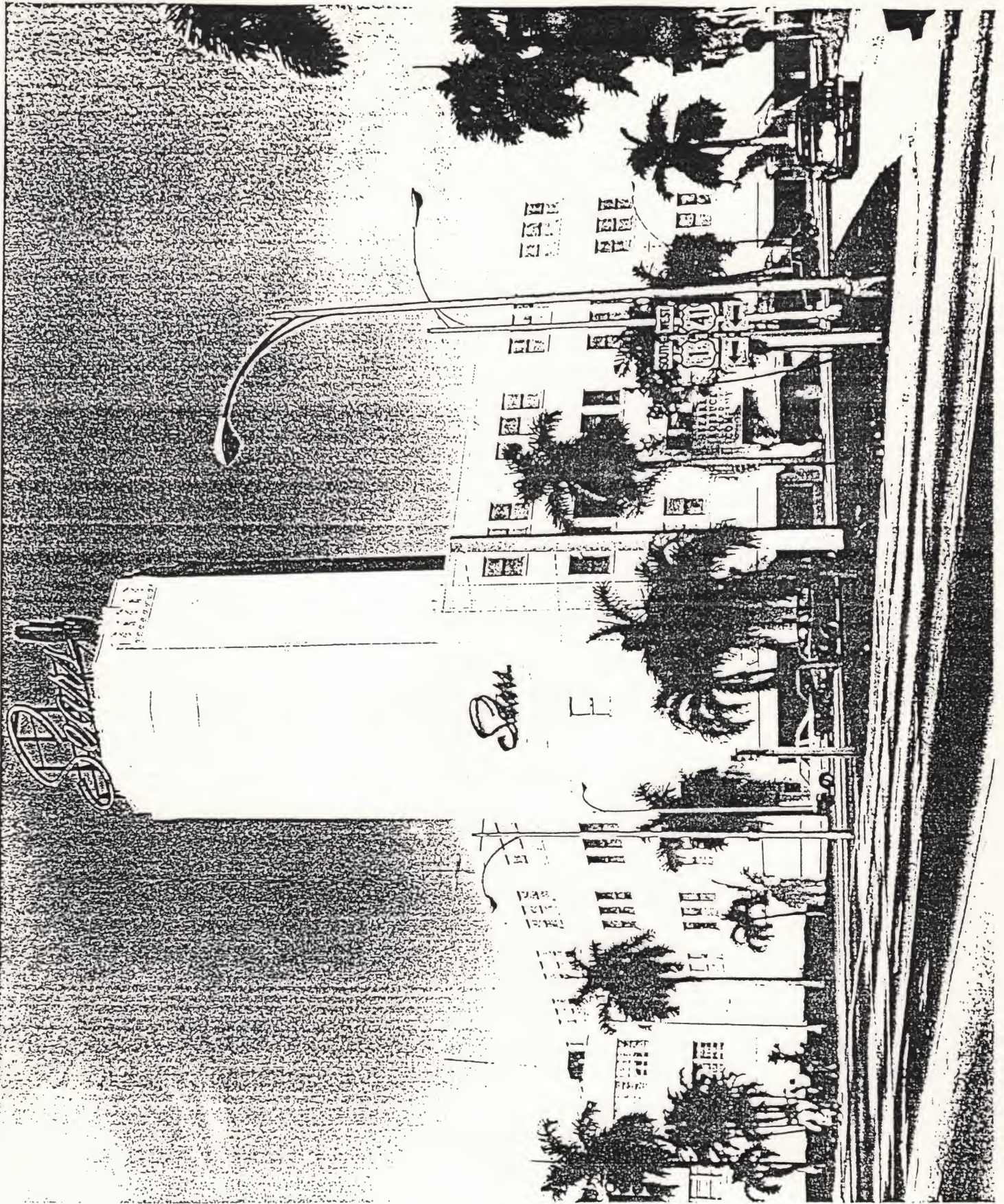
Although not part of the original Sears building, the Burdine's annex maintains a continuity of design due to its similar scale, setback, and use of materials. The building features a stepped facade in the central bay, highlighting the main entrance. The recessed doorway is flanked by native keystone and is topped with a large panel of glass block. Keystone also defines the foundation of the building. Large, store windows with metal awnings are located on either side of the main entrance.

A one story service station was added to the south facade of the Sears building in 1934. This addition was enclosed, and a second and third story were added in 1958. The southern end of the addition features an octagonal corner, echoing the octagonal tower. Low relief ornamentation decorates the first story, while the second and third stories are plain. Awning windows, grouped in banks of four, pierce the upper two stories.

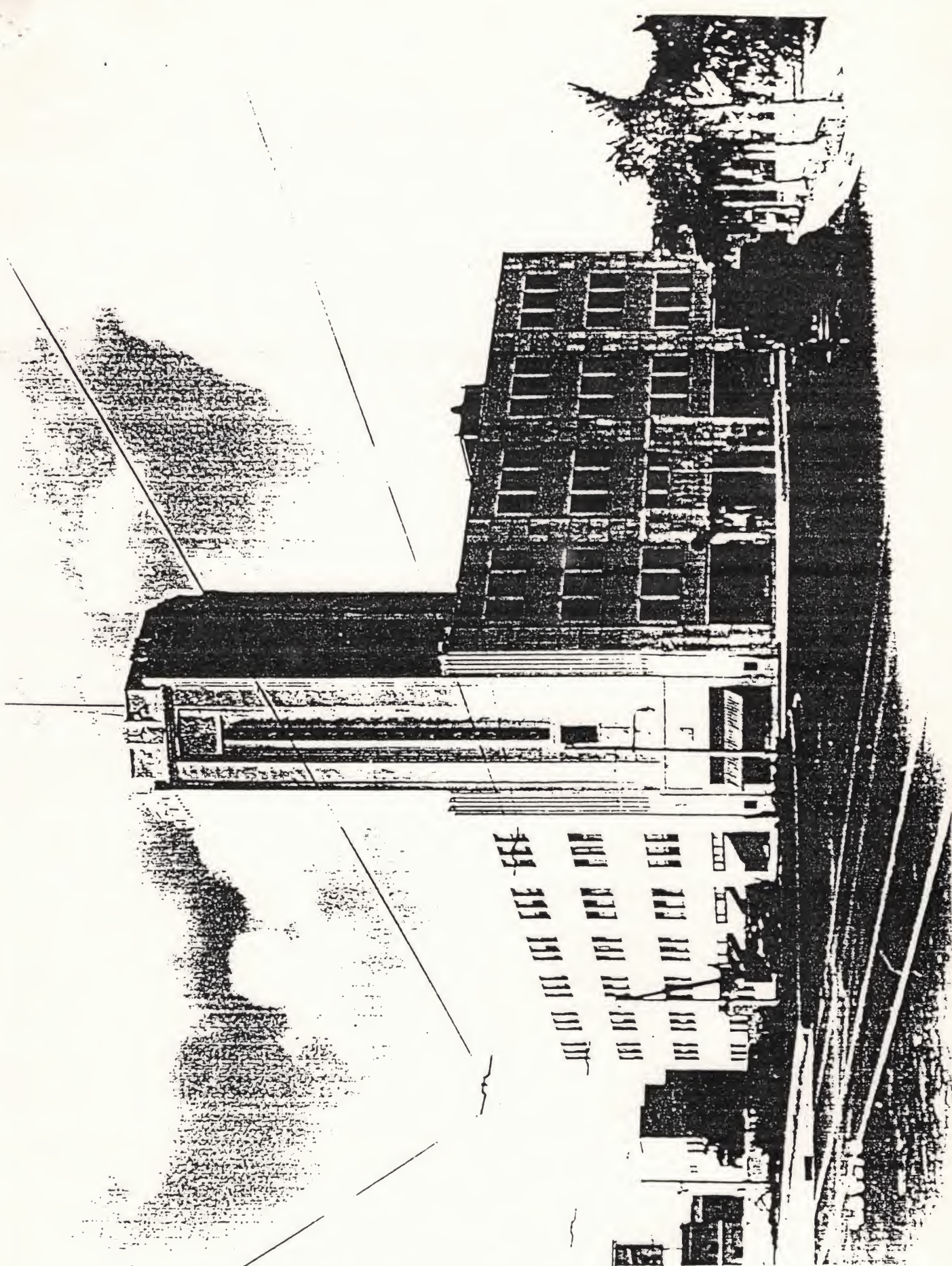
Also, located on the site on the southwest corner are a two story automobile service station with two attached service bays and an open garage. The remainder of the site is a surface parking lot.

Contributing Structures and/or Landscape Features:

The Sears building, including the Burdine's annex, is a contributing structure. The service station is a noncontributing structure. There are no contributing landscape features on the site.



Sears, Roebuck and Co.
1300 Biscayne Boulevard
South and east facades



Sears, Roebuck and Co.
1300 Biscayne Boulevard
c. 1930
(Courtesy Historical Association of Southern Florida)

IV. PLANNING CONTEXT

Present Trends and Conditions:

Since the closing of the Sears store in 1983, the future of the building has been uncertain. Various proposals, from demolition to reopening of the store, have been made. The building, however, has remained standing, but vacant.

On June 19, 1991 Sears announced that it would donate its property to Dade County for the development of the proposed performing arts center. This offer was made at the suggestion of the Performing Arts Center Trust, which had originally requested only the historic building itself for use as an experimental, black-box theater. The County is now expected to accept the offer officially, pending inspection and engineering studies.

Although plans for the use of the property have been discussed informally, the County has not yet issued a request for proposals for a theater consultant, cost estimator and acoustics expert, nor has it initiated a design competition for architects.

The Sears building has been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Preservation Incentives:

Historic preservation should be viewed as an opportunity, not as an impediment in the development of plans for the performing arts center. The Historic and Environmental Preservation Board should be prepared to work cooperatively with all concerned agencies in the development of a strategy that would incorporate as much of the historic building as possible into the performing arts center. The technical expertise of the Board members could be invaluable in this process.

Historic designation would relieve the property owner of the requirement for review of the project by the State Historic Preservation Office, per the provisions of the Downtown Miami Development of Regional Impact Master Development Order. Locally designated sites need not be submitted for State review.

Although State historic preservation grants have been reduced in recent years, the Sears building's historic status would qualify it for rehabilitation funding.

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